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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000313

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

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TAGS: PHUM KIPR KIRF PGOV PINR PREL SOCI UZ

SUBJECT: FORMER MUFTI: RELIGIOUS EXTREMIST THREAT WEAKENING

REF: A. 07 TASHKENT 1301

1B. TASHKENT 295

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, the former Mufti of Uzbekistan and Central Asia, received pol-econ chief and poloff at his Tashkent home on March 4. Muhammad Sodiq shared his view with Emboffs that religious extremism in Uzbekistan has become less of a threat now than before, which he credited to both the government's and his own efforts. In contrast to previous years, Muhammad Sodiq appears to enjoy greater latitude vis-a-vis the government to share his views with the Uzbek public, including through a weekly radio show, frequent publications, and his website. Muhammad Sodiq also noted rising Mosque attendance and lamented poor levels of education for imams, which he has sought to rectify through weekly (and technically illegal) trainings at his home. Finally, he mentioned being offended by an academic article written about him by a prominent AmCit academic on Central Asia, which he seemed to mistakenly believe was an official U.S. government publication. Muhammad Sodiq's claim about weakening support for religious extremism is difficult to verify, but open (and we hope, moderate) religiosity does appear to be on the rise. End summary.

FIRST MEETING WITH SODIQ IN EIGHT MONTHS

¶2. (C) On March 4, Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, the former Mufti of Uzbekistan and Central Asia, received pol-econ chief and poloff at his Tashkent home. Emboffs had attempted to arrange a meeting with Muhammad Sodiq since last fall, but they were eventually told through intermediaries to wait until after the December 2007 presidential election.

(Comment: Following President Karimov's reelection, the government is presumably now less sensitive to foreign diplomats meeting with the former Mufti, who continues to be an unofficial spiritual leader for the majority of believers in Uzbekistan and one of the country's few genuinely independent public figures. Muhammad Sodiq is also a very busy man, which could partly explain the delay. End comment.) It was Muhammad Sodiq's first meeting with U.S. government officials since Ambassador-at-Large for Religious

Freedom John Hanford's trip to Uzbekistan in June 2007 (ref A). The Ambassador has not yet called on Muhammad Sodiq, as he is still awaiting approval for an introductory meeting with the current Mufti.

SODIQ SEES EXTREMISM AS LESS OF A THREAT THAN BEFORE

¶3. (C) During the meeting, Muhammad Sodiq shared his view with Emboffs that religious extremism in Uzbekistan has become less of a threat than in previous years, which he believed was due to the government's and his own efforts. He credited the Uzbek government with investing more in the promotion of traditional Islam. As evidence, he pointed towards the construction of the large new Hazrati Imam Mosque in Tashkent, which opened in June 2007 and can hold 3,500 congregants inside and another 30,000 congregants on the adjacent square (Note: As he is no doubt aware, the construction was funded by Saudi money, which the government had held for some time; the government agreed to proceed with construction only after the Saudis threatened to pull funding. End note.) He also noted that the International Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (ISESCO) designated Tashkent as one of the world's four Islamic Cultural Capitals for 2007. Muhammad Sodiq also credited his own efforts to reach out to ex-extremists, including those recently released from prison. He also said that he continues to routinely denounce religious extremism in radio broadcasts and in his frequent publications, which are widely read in Uzbekistan.

GREATER LATITUDE TO PROPAGATE HIS VIEWS THAN PREVIOUSLY

¶4. (C) Muhammad Sodiq appears to now have greater latitude vis-a-vis the government to share his views with the Uzbek public than previously. He stated that the government had approached him "a few years ago" to enlist his assistance in combating extremism, which he readily agreed to provide. He now has his own weekly one-hour radio show, and he also noted that his books and audio cassettes of his sermons are widely available in Tashkent. In a separate conversation with the DCM at a recent national day reception, Mohammad Sodiq boasted that his seven websites in Uzbek and Russian received thousands of hits each week. He also mentioned to the DCM that he had recently traveled to Saudi Arabia for the annual meeting of the Saudi-based Association of Senior Ulama just prior to this year's hajj. Muhammad Sodiq said he was the only representative from the former Soviet Union in this prestigious group of some twenty ulama (Comment: If true, this reflects at the least great Saudi confidence in this Islamic leader. End comment.) DCM has also learned from Kuwaiti Embassy contacts that Muhammad Sodiq occasionally travels to Kuwait.

SODIQ EXPRESSES CONCERN REGARDING COPYRIGHT VIOLATIONS

¶5. (C) Interestingly, Muhammad Sodiq appeared quite concerned that some of his works were being pirated. He has begun to sell his books with holograms in an attempt to stymie counterfeiters. He also complained in general that copyrights were not widely respected in Uzbekistan, noting that even Uzbekistan's national television station broadcasted international soccer matches without the appropriate licenses. He said that he had raised the importance of copyright protection in his discussions with government officials, and that he believed this had contributed to recent GOU enforcement efforts (ref B).

MOSQUE ATTENDANCE CONTINUES TO CLIMB

¶6. (C) When asked by poloff about mosque attendance levels, Muhammad Sodiq replied that attendance at prayers, especially by youth, continues to climb, observing that some mosques could barely accommodate the increased numbers. However, he stated that the government was aware of the problem, and had plans to enlarge seven or eight Mosques in Tashkent, though

he was unsure what the government was doing to accommodate crowds in other regions of the country.

LAMENTS INADEQUATE TRAININGS OF IMAMS

¶7. (C) Muhammad Sodiq also lamented the generally inadequate training of imams in Uzbekistan. In an attempt to improve their level of education, he said that he holds trainings for imams at his home several days a week, even though he recognized that such trainings were technically illegal (Note: Uzbekistan's strict religion laws makes any religious education conducted outside of government-approved bodies illegal, including private religious education conducted in one's own home. End note.) However, he believed that the government was unlikely to interfere with his training of imams given his stature in the community.

GREATLY OFFENDED BY PROMINENT AMCIT SCHOLAR'S ARTICLE

¶8. (C) Towards the end of the meeting, Muhammad Sodiq brought up an article written about him by an unnamed AmCit academic, which greatly offended him. Muhammad Sodiq said that the article appeared on the website of the Pentagon and had characterized him as "worse than Osama bin Laden" and "an extremist" (Comment: Muhammad Sodiq's comment that the article appeared on the "Pentagon website" suggests that he thinks it might be an official U.S. government publication. End comment.) He also was offended that no one from the United States Embassy had called him to apologize for the article. Muhammad Sodiq did not say whether he had actually read the article (published in English, which he is not known to read fluently), but said its existence was brought to his attention by Uzbek government officials, who in his words, tried to "downplay" its significance. He said bygones are bygones and expressed his appreciation for Emboff's visit.

¶9. (C) Poloff was able to find on the internet what appears to be the article that Muhammad Sodiq mentioned. It was written by a prominent AmCit scholar on Central Asia and was linked to the National Defense University website (which could have been mistakenly construed as the "Pentagon website.") The article characterizes Muhammad Sodiq as being conservative and politically ambitious and also quotes a "close associate" describing him as a "political chameleon who can adapt to changing winds" and "startlingly fixated on money." The article also claims that his "fundamental goal" is the "gradual but full Islamization of Uzbek society," and that he would "like to see a return of the Muslim caliphate." However, the article also clearly explains that Muhammad Sodiq is not an extremist and has rejected violence.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) TQ AmCit scholar is known to frequently collaborate on such articles with Uzbek scholar Baktiyar Babadjanov, who we suspect may have contributed much of the information about Muhammad Sodiq for the AmCit's article. Babadjanov is a respected and legitimate scholar, who nonetheless seems to know what is required of him to stay within the government's good graces. The comments in the article mirror those made to pol-econ chief last fall by government official and former Uzbek Embassy in Washington press attache Furqat Sodikov. Babadjanov and he both seem to feed from the same government propaganda trough, and we suspect this was an attempt to simultaneously weaken Muhammad Sodiq's credibility in the United States and poison his trust of us. We do not discount that Muhammad Sodiq understands this as well.

¶11. (C) Muhammad Sodiq's claim that religious extremism is weakening is difficult to verify. Some government officials with whom we have spoken make the same point, while other - equally thoughtful - officials think otherwise. What is clear is that Uzbeks in Tashkent and the regions are more openly religious, and this religiosity seems to have spread

across social groups and classes. This observation has been made by two poloffs who previously lived in Uzbekistan between 2001 and 2004.

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